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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the basic question of whether there is actually measurable change in personality characteristics occurring during or subsequent to the encounter group experience. The study examined instruments which may prove useful in the detection of change in an objective and quantifiable mode which can be subjected to statistical analysis. The subjects were undergraduate students who requested an encounter group experience. Three personality measurement instruments were administered to each of the subjects at the group's first, fourth, and eighth meetings. The results were inconsistent, but indicated that self-ratings of individuals do change over time when rated on a semantic differential scale. Proponents of the encounter group experience state that this experience is capable of changing the way a person orients himself toward others. The results of the two groups in this study indicated the general stability of interpersonal orientations. The authors concluded by suggesting possible directions of future research. (Author/BW)

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THE PROCESS OF ENCOUNTER: A LOOK AT PERSONALITY CHANGE

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INTRODUCTION

Rogers (1968) stresses that encounter groups and their varied derivatives across the cultural United States can be criticized or pursued, but that their impact and permanence cannot be ignored or underestimated. Whether the dynamic processes within the group emenate from nonverbal communications, experiential situations, emotional catharsis, or task cooperation learning, is of little import to an analysis of group activity when reduced to the fundamental concept of interpersonal relations, which is the focal point of virtually any of these modes. Yalom (1970) speaks of the patient in group therapy as a victim of disrupted interpersonal relations whose goals change from that of seeking relief from anxiety or depression to learning to communicate with others.

The research available on encounter groups does not reflect a masterpiece of precision. Laboratory methods and instruments have not proved highly amenable to the study of group changes. There is a quantity of data in the form of short questionnaires completed by group participants after various intervals of time have lapsed during the group experience, and at some time subsequent to the termination of the group. Several attempts have been made to design psychological tests capable of predicting group behavior. These include variants of the Sentence Association Test (Sutherland, Gill, & Phillipson, 1967 Sentence Completion Test (Ben-Zeev, 1958), and sixty-item self-report Q-sort (Hill, 1955). The results have been ambiguous at best, and have contributed little to the study of behavior change in group members. There is a plethora of data which is based on the subjec-

jective impressions of the group leader, and which lacks any attempt at quantitative analysis.

In the broadest sense, the goal of an encounter group is to effect a change in the behavior of the individual in a manner that wi facilitate the improvement of interpersonal relationships. Becoming "more trusting" or "more open," which is reflected in the overt behavior of the individual, suggests changes in the underlying personality. Lewin (Marrow, 1967) indicated, at the outset of his resear with training groups, that broad characteristic change was a possible outcome of group training. The occurrence of changes in personality or aspects of the personalities of the participants lead to the evaluation of the group as being a success or a failure.

The present study investigated the basic question of whether there is actually measurable change in personality characteristics occurring during or subsequent to the encounter group experience. This fundamental question must be resolved, and the elements of change must be ascertained before direction can be considered. The present study examined instruments which may prove useful in the detection of change in an objective and quantifiable mode which can be sujected to statistical analysis.

METHOD

Subjects

Ss were undergraduate students at Southern Methodist University who requested an encounter group experience. Two separate groups were conducted consisting of eight sessions over a two month period for a total of 24 hours for each group. The male leader was the same for both groups, his co-leaders were two different less experienced females. One group was composed of five males and three females, and the other group, nine males and six females. (Leaders are included

in the totals for both groups.)

Tests

The 16 Personality Factor Test (16 PF) (Cattell, 1950) was designed to measure psychological realities called traits, which Cattell believed to exist in some tangible form, and which are capable of directing behavior. Trait theory infers an underlying personality structure in individuals. The individual can be measured along a dimension of these traits. Basic to this notion is a permanence and stability which remains unaltered by mood changes, and which can be detected by means of a series of questions to which the individual responds.

The Fundamental Interpersonal Orientation (Firo-B) (Schutz, 1958) is based on three postulated interpersonal needs: inclusion, control, and affection. The interpersonal needs are indicated by "expressed behavior," and "wanted behavior." Schutz derived a method of measuring these needs in relation to the component forms of behavior, and obtained a compatibility coefficient sufficient for predicting individual interactions within the group. The measures have been found to correlate with other independent measures from the encounter group experience (Gordon & Bodden, 1970).

A semantic differential scale consisting of 27 pairs of bipolar adjectives was developed utilizing Cattell's (1950) analysis of Allport and Odbert's (1936) adjective trait list. Norman (1963) found that a set of five independent orthogonal factors consistently emerged from subjects rating peers on a bipolar adjective list. These findings suggest that such ratings reflect an underlying personality structure which may be measured by a semantic differential list.

Procedure

The three instruments described above were administered to each

S and the leaders at the first meeting of the group, the fourth meeting, and the eighth meeting. The adjective trait list was repeated three times with each test administration. Instructions for one list asked the subject to rate himself with respect to the group. Each participant was then asked to rate himself as he thought the "group-sees-me". Finally, the subject was instructed to rate the group as a whole unit. Statistical analysis for the 16 PF and Firo B was a one way analysis of variance (Dixon, 1967) performed on each variable. Further, Duncan's New Multiple Range Test (Kirk, 1968) was applied to the results obtained from the analysis of variance. The 27 pairs of bipolar adjectives from the semantic differential scale were analyzed by means of student t-tests. All analyses were conducted for each group separately, and then in combination (N=23).

RESULTS

There were no significant differences ($p. < .25$) between the mean scores on any factor of Cattell's 16 PF at the beginning, middle, and end of the encounter group experience. Furthermore, there were no significant differences on these factors when the groups were combined. Applying Duncan's Multiple Range Test, there were no significant differences between the means of any two factors measured across sessions.

No significant differences were obtained between the scores on the six scales of Schutz's Firo-B for all three sessions measured in the separate or in the combined groups. Again, the test between means of any scale across sessions proved not to be significant at the .25 level.

There were, however, significant differences between the first and the last self-ratings on twelve of the semantic differential scales ($p. < .05$). At the end of the encounter group sessions, Ss rated

themselves as more trusting, happy, warm, respected, interesting, friendly, pleasant, meaningful, loving, and close. Furthermore, Ss indicated that the "group-sees-me" as more honest, trusting, intelligent, self-confident, important, warm, friendly, valuable, sociable, meaningful, outgoing, liked, magnetic, and including. T-tests, again, confirmed a significant ($p. < .05$) change in these fourteen ratings from the first to the last encounter session. Finally, Ss saw the group as more trusting, happy, self-confident, close, liked, inviting, and magnetic following the encounter group experience. These seven ratings were significant ($p. < .05$).

DISCUSSION

The argument concerning encounter groups as an effective tool for bringing about changes in interpersonal relationships versus a whimsical and dangerous fad wages throughout the current literature. Nevertheless, groups, both privately and institutionally supported, emerge at an astounding rate. Yalom (1969) estimates that more troubled people in California seek help from these groups than from the more traditional forms of therapeutic process. By the very nature of this rapid rise it has become increasingly difficult to subject such groups to systematic empirical study. The staggering growth in number and kind of groups continues to indicate the need for research that will demonstrate what, if anything, is happening to the participants in an encounter group experience.

Greening (1964) believed that attacks upon the effectiveness of sensitivity training were the result of misinterpreting the goals of the encounter group to be unilateral attempts at making people more open, more trusting, and more sensitive to the feelings of others. He maintained that goals included increasing the participants' capacity to select more flexible and more realistic modes of behavior on the

basis of discerning assessment of their own goals and needs, and the interpretation of tasks that confront them. However, such goals are very difficult to measure empirically.

Furthermore, Rogers (1969), while proselytizing the encounter group, points out that its most obvious defficiency is the fleeting occurrence of behavior changes. If an individual becomes more open, meaningful interactions are more likely to occur, which will aid him in gaining insight into how he is functioning at the time. This insight is necessary to reorganize his behavior in subsequent interactions. The present study indicated that personality changes, measurable by the 16 PF or Firo-B, did not occur during the group experience, and raised questions concerning the effectiveness of encounter group techniques. Yalom (1969) suggested a need for long term group therapeutic processes to effect changes in basic personality structures, and that short emotional or cathartic experience cannot have enduring results. However, extending the group experience would eliminate it from the category of encounter groups since it would become more similar to group psychotherapy. It would no longer be the intensive experience which is characteristic of an encounter group.

Measurement of outcome is complex for both the encounter group and group psychotherapy. Reports of the outcome of psychotherapy show a limited amount of measured change in the participant, and a low level of correlation among the separate measures of such change (Fiske 1971). The present study suggested that an eight week encounter group may not effect personality changes as measured by the 16 PF or Firo-B

Major difficulties found in attempts to obtain quantitative data on personality change include the lack of appropriate tests which will: (a) not sensitize the subjects, (b) be reliable, and (c) measure actual characterological differences in an objective way

amenable to statistical analysis.

From first analysis it would seem that measurable change in personality traits as delineated by Cattell (1950) would be highly improbable. However, Cattell links these traits directly to behavior, and obtains his measures from the individual's responses to his test. Such data are the responses of the individuals trying to describe themselves as accurately as possible. These individuals would be only as frank as they wished to questions posed by a test (Maddi, 1966). For example, an increased openness and trust should increase the willingness of the individual to reveal himself in the test situation.

The present study supports Cattell's trait theory. He views traits as mental structures (Cattell, 1950), inferences from observed behaviors which account for regularity or consistency of behavior. The 16 PF (Cattell, 1950) obtains source traits through the process of factor analysis. It is through interaction of source traits that the clusters of manifest or overt variables called surface traits emerge. The experience of a situation such as an encounter group may change these manifest or overt traits, but may only change the relative importance of the source traits in their influence on overt behavior.

The present study indicates that self-ratings of individuals do change over time when rated on a semantic differential scale. These data support Hartley's (1968) finding that significant differences occur between self-ratins and ratings of others in a sensitivity group with separate administrations of Osgood's Semantic Differential Scale. Clearly, ratings of how the "group-sees-me" and how "I-see-group" also change during an encounter group experience. A most interesting observation from the present study is that individuals see themselves as improving on many dimensions, and further indicate that this is apparently obvious to other group members. In

contrast, however, individuals do not indicate that there is as much change apparent in the group as a whole unit.

Caution must be used in the interpretation of such data. Semantic trait ratings depend upon subjective person-perception ratings by others. Several investigators have inferred that ratings of this type represent constructs of the perceiver, and not necessarily hypothesized states of characteristics perceived (Norman, 1967; Passini & Norman, 1966; D'Andrade, 1965; & Mischel, 1968). Furthermore, the measure is subjective and the changes in a positive direction may well be the result of a temporary "halo effect" following group experience, and may not reflect permanent behavioral or personality trait changes in the individual. This hypothesis is supported by the data which suggests that individuals do not see as much change occurring in the group as they see in themselves. A follow-up test would serve to clarify this issue to a greater extent.

Proponents of the encounter group experience state that this intense experience is capable of changing the way a person orients himself toward others in future situations, or at least in the group situation. Schutz (1958) has indicated that interpersonal orientations are stable traits, and that test retest yields a coefficient of stability. The results of the two groups conducted in the present study support the stability of the Firo-B scales.

Direction of Future Research

Since the perceptual processes of the individual are an integral part of the encounter group experience, it seems useful and beneficial to investigate any perceptual changes occurring during the span of the group. Multidimensional methods of scaling appear to be an effective tool in the investigation of perceptual change.

 The concept of psychological distance can be applied to a

variety of attributes and lends precision and power to the specification of personality variables (Jackson, 1966). The technique demands no prior specification of the relevant dimensions of judgement, because these emerge from the scaling procedure. The authors of the present study are now analyzing the data of the two groups by means of the multidimensional scaling technique.

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